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Context to the nugget

Vinay puts the Vajpayee – Advani relationship in perspective. He speaks about how they had two occasions where the power equation flipped completely. He shares other examples to illustrate how special this dynamic is when you compare it to most other relationships at the top across disciplines.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And maybe before we dive into the nuts and bolts of the book Vinay, I would love to set context right, in terms of why specifically in India this notion of teamwork is something that we should pay attention to. I think before we started recording this conversation you briefly spoke about the battle of Panipat as well. So, just set context for us more in the Indian context to why this is special in the context of teamwork.

Vinay Sitapati (VS): Well, Deepak all the Indians who are amongst your listeners I don't have to sell you this idea that Indians are terrible at teamwork and many of your listeners have also worked in a foreign setting and you not just see that the setting makes for very different aspects of teamwork but the same Indians who behave very badly in an Indian organisational setting driven by ego, factions, backbiting, being a nasty boss or insubordinate employee, these are all classic Indian traits. This is the HR manager's nightmare in any Indian firm. But you don't... it's not confined just to the corporate world. In political parties, for example, Indian parties are always splitting. The Congress right now is going through internal fighting. Every month or so some senior leader of the Congress splits and taking away 10 MLAs, 20 MLAs; this is a standard Congress story all the way from the 1960s. Other parties like the NCP recently almost split in Maharashtra; Shiv Sena has split several times, the Dravidian parties, which actually have the same ideology splits on the basis of personality. The Communist parties split again on the basis of ideology "lines" or this question of should we be part of democracy or should we be an underground movement. So, political parties this is endemic. In the midst of this the fact that the BJP is almost split proof, it doesn't split to me tells me something, something is going on here. That this is in some sense the secret sauce of the BJP and the book seeks to explore what is the answer to it. So, it's an Indian problem, it's there in all facets of Indian society, it's the HR manager's nightmare in any corporate firm and look Indians also realise how to manage it, but it's a feature. To give you another example Deepak, hierarchy in organisations are very important in India. In the bureaucracy, for example, in the senior bureaucracy in India you have to give an exam when you are in your early 20s, the UPSC exam, you get a rank in that exam and you are allotted a batch based on when you got in. Almost 30 years later when you are for the top post in government you are becoming an empanelled secretary, you want to be foreign secretary, you want to be cabinet secretary, your rank in that exam and your batch in the exam still plays a hierarchical role. And even today if a foreign secretary is "promoted" out of turn right and when we mean out of turn it means that the rank that that person had 30 years ago has changed by

the time the person becomes Foreign Secretary, others resign, his or her “seniors” resign; I am not joking this is truth. And in this soil, looking at a BJP where, you know, there are people in today’s BJP that don’t like Modi but they won’t say so publicly especially those with an RSS background and I give the example and we can talk about this Deepak in some detail, Vajpayee and Advani frequently switched roles and reported to each other and I think that’s unprecedented. So, what makes the BJP’s teamwork special is not just the non-teamwork in other political parties it was competing with but the soil of India which makes for very bad teamwork.

DJ: Got it. And the quick reference to battle of Panipat because you have made an interesting comment before we started recording.

VS: Yeah, so, I talk about in the book how the BJP is obsessed with a certain reading of Indian history and that reading of Indian history is the following, which is if India is so glorious why do Indians keep getting invaded, that’s the puzzle. And the answer to the BJP is because at key moments Indians and for them its Hindus fight with each other. And it’s not just one caste fighting another caste, you know, as he points here, Shivaji was betrayed by his own caste men, Maharana Pratap was betrayed by his own cast men, and so Indians generally try to stab each other in the back. Now again, the historical validity of this story is we can debate but that’s the reason that’s what the BJP takes out of this. So, for example in the late 18th century, the third battle of Panipat was fought between the Marathas under the Peshwas and Ahmad Shah Abdali who was coming from outside India. It’s a pivotal battle because the British have a tiny presence in India at that time but the reigning power in India are not the Mughals who are in decline, but the Marathas who are ascended. And in some sense the Marathas are now providing protection to the Mughals so they are the reigning power. And the Marathas are soundly defeated in this battle. And according to the BJP, according to the RSS had the Marathas not lost there wouldn’t have been this vacuum which the British would have exploited and came. I think last year itself Amit Shah said in reference to that battle that the Marathas had won 100 battles or something like that, but they lost this one battle and because of that India was enslaved for 200 years. And their reading for why the Marathas lost the third battle of Panipat was infighting. The Marathas wasn’t a centralised command, you had the Peshwas who were normally on top, but you had the Holkars, the Scindias, the Bhonsles, who were supplying armies so it was a confederacy, the Jats and the Rajputs of North India did not help the Marathas, and as a result of which there was no teamwork. Once again Deepak, my job is not to assess the historical validity of this narrative but is to show you that this narrative, this lesson of history has an organisational consequence. And that’s what’s remarkable about the BJP, it’s why it wins.

DJ: It’s a great point maybe we should talk about it later in the conversation. It’s also about the power of storytelling in the way you shape culture, in the way you shape believes, in the way you create glue. But going back to the piece you alluded to which is about Vajpayee and Advani switching places, I quote from your book in Page 297 you say what makes the Advani and Vajpayee relationship even more distinct was an ability to switch places and upturn hierarchies not once but twice. You say between 1957 and 1985 Vajpayee was plainly the leader but between 1986 and 1995 when the party moved in a more radical direction, Vajpayee served under Advani but in the decade after 1995 they switched places again and Vajpayee led the party. Put this in perspective for us in the context of relationships at the top, you know, towards the end of the book you talk about a few other relationships and just talk about how special this is and how unprecedented this is. So, before we talk about how they navigated these transitions, I would love for you to place this dynamic in context of what we generally observe.

VS: Well, Deepak, take the Barack Obama-Joe Biden relationship; it’s now in the news. Joe Biden loyally served Barack Obama for eight years, even though he was older and had more experience in politics, which is I would say quite remarkable. He was willing to put his ego in his pocket. Cut to

now, where Biden has won the elections and has become President or at least everyone except Donald Trump thinks so. Imagine a situation in which now Obama is hired by Biden to serve on his cabinet and Obama has to report to Biden, that's the first switch. Imagine now eight years later a conceivable scenario in which Obama once again becomes President and Biden once again serves loyally under Obama, it sounds ridiculous. That's precisely what happened between Vajpayee and Advani that in 1968 after the death of Deendayal Upadhyaya, Vajpayee takes control of the Jana Sangh, which is a precursor to the BJP and all the way until 1986 he is in charge. He founds the BJP in his own image in 1980, in 1986 the RSS orders him to step down and Advani becomes party president, he has a more radical or "hard line" image and from 1986 to 1995, Vajpayee serves under Advani. Advani is not just the party leader he's also the most popular face of the BJP, he stands on the rath yatra, the converted Toyota and that leads to the rise of the BJP not under Vajpayee but under Advani and in 1995, November 1995 in Bombay when they are having their convention, they are preparing for the elections to happen a few months later in May 1996 and everybody expects Advani to be the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP and everyone expects the BJP to be the single largest party. What does Advani do at that stage? He announces to the shock of the RSS that it is Vajpayee who will be the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP and there's almost a revolt saying that what has happened, but Vajpayee becomes the prime ministerial face and he does become Prime Minister for 13 days in 1996, for 13 months in 1998 and then for a full five-year term between 1999 and 2004 and during this entire period it's Advani who eventually becomes Deputy Prime Minister who serves under Vajpayee. I think it is just astonishing. When I asked, when I looked around and asked in politics certainly there is no Indian example. It is true that Subhash Chandra Bose served under Nehru, but never the other way round. I have been pointed out examples in sports where you do see a switching. For example, Virat Kohli served under Mahendra Singh Dhoni when Dhoni was captain and then Kohli becomes captain and Dhoni serves under him. But what you haven't seen is a second switch, which is Dhoni once again becoming captain and Kohli serving under him. If that happens, I would say that at least in the world of cricket there's an analogy to this. And Deepak, as I pointed out on the book, this is only a mirror for a larger ideological belief in teamwork no matter what that typifies the BJP.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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